DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 228 CS 505 634

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TITLE Small Talk: A Big Communicative Function in the Organization?
PUB DATE 19 May 87
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (78th, Syracuse, NY, May 18-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; *Employee Attitudes; *Employer Employee Relationship; *Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Relationship; Organizational Climate; *Organizational Communication; Social Environment; Vertical Organization; *Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS *Conversation; Organizational Culture; *Small Talk

ABSTRACT

Defining small talk as "superficial talk about matters of little concern," a study examined the role of small talk in the work place. Subjects, 51 white collar workers and clerical employees at three corporations, an Eastern state university, and two small businesses completed a questionnaire concerning the following questions: (1) What are employees' feelings about small talk in general? (2) Is there a correlation between small talk with one's boss and trust in him or her? (3) Does small talk in the organization correlate with openness? and (4) What topics do people cover during small talk with boss and coworkers? Results indicated that respondents did not have negative opinions about small talk and small talk users. In fact, they considered small talk useful and a way of getting to know people. On the other hand, respondents did not wish their bosses to know more about their personal lives and seemed to prefer small talk with coworkers more than with their bosses. Findings also indicated that employees had a negative opinion about some aspects of small talk with their employers, but that they did appear to appreciate the ability to initiate small talk with the boss. Employees seemed to prefer controlling their relationships with their employers by maintaining its nonpersonal nature in such ways as selecting of nonpersonal topics during small talk rather than discussing their personal lives as they did with coworkers. (Six tables of data and references are included.) (NKA)

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Small Talk: A Big Communicative Function in the Organization?

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A paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association Conference, May 19, 1987, Syracuse, New York.

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There has been a paucity of research focused on small talk per se, and even less on the role this informal interaction may play in the organization. It may be that some organizations tolerate or encourage their employees to engage in conversation in order to sustain a more satisfying, and presumably more productive work environment. Other organizations may prefer a quieter atmosphere more conducive to concentrating on the task at hand.

A few studies have attempted to ascertain the role of small talk in daily life, why people engage in it and how they view it. A fair amount of research has concentrated on initial interactions and uncertainty reduction, areas which are relevant to the role of small talk.

Glauser (1984) called for more synthesis between research into how communication occurs and how it is affected by organizational structure. The present study examines some possible components of small talk and considers organizational structure only in the broadest terms, such as the difference in position of superior and subordinate.

Review of Literature

Moutoux and Porte (1980) concluded their research on small talk in the organization by suggesting that a positive attitude leads to increased worker productivity, and that attitude is influenced by small talk. They reached this conclusion after interviewing supervisors about their employees. Although the Moutoux and Porte study had little

theoretical grounding to establish small talk's influence on attitude, interpersonal theory does suggest possible elements of small talk which may explain this influence.

Berger & Calabrese (1975) theorized that people strive to achieve stable, predictable, and controllable environments, to reduce uncertainty and increase predictability. At the beginning of an interchange, uncertainty about the dyadic partner is high, but gets lower as the interchange progresses. Sunnafrank (1983) defines small talk as conversational modes designed to maintain stability, predictability, and controllability. In a study of individuals in initial meetings with others whose attitudes they expected to be different from their own, he found that after having a normal initial conversation, individuals perceive future conversations as most probably being stable, predictable, and controllable, and are unlikely to use any communicative behavior which would threaten this stability and controllability.

Brown & Levinson (1978) say that seeking agreement is a way to claim common ground. Raising safe topics allows conversants to stress their agreement with each other and may allow one partner to satisfy the need to be right. Further, some small talk falls into the category of "politeness forms" which have evolved as buffers for any subsequent threat before its occurrence. Greetings and small talk are used to soften requests and to minimize a perception of threat in an unpleasant message.

Bell & Daly (1984) point out that the manner in which a subordinate speaks may increase his or her admiration by a superior. "It is primarily through talk and carefully controlled actions that people influence the level

of attraction others feel toward them" (p. 91). Their study on affinity-seeking strategies, as well as that of Richmond, McCroskey, & Davis (1986) include a polling of subjects' attitudes about various affinity-seeking tactics. High on respondents' lists were conversational rule-keeping, a metacommunicative element which can be apparent even in small talk. Even when conversation consists only of ritualized forms, it still contains basic elements which obligate the partner to respond from a limited range of standardized choices (Beach & Dunning, 1982).

Pearce, Cronen, Johnson, Jones & Raymond (1980) maintain that a conversation has three levels of meaning -- content, relational, and episode -- and that individuals follow their own hierarchical rule system for determining which level should prevail at any given time. Hecht, Sereno & Spitzberg (1984) reason that when the topic is unimportant, conversants are more concerned about their own self-image, and that as the topic increases in importance to one of the conversants, the role the other plays in supporting the topic gains importance as well.

Beach & Dunning (1982) assert that small talk can occur for its own sake or lead up to a clear purpose. It can be used to "maintain a low-risk environment, uncover interesting topics, and discover or set up subsequent purposes for interaction" (pp. 183-184). When used with a purpose in mind, too much small talk may have a negative outcome. In their study examining speech acts that signal turn-taking during conversation, they included small talk as one of five such speech acts, which they term "pre," or preliminary to conversation, and which serves as "an <u>explicit</u> display of <u>implicit</u> dimensions of social reality." Answers usually follow questions, and

greetings are most likely reciprocated, reflecting the cause and effect of the world. Pre-indexes "increase the likelihood that certain inferences will be drawn, while others will be avoided and/or deemed irrelevant" (p. 177). They conclude that people can strategically manage interchanges in order to portray themselves positively.

Seeking stability in a relationship may go so far that conversational partners may assume similarity or exaggerate the amount of their agreement even where there is no compelling evidence to support it (Duck, 1976). McLaughlin, Cody & Rosenstein (1983) studied initial conversations between strangers and found that people strove to appear similar to their partner, consistently preferring agreement by using non-arguable ritualized phrases. Appearing similar to one's conversational partner increases predictability, decreases uncertainty, facilitates interpersonal attraction, and makes the likelihood greater that the conversants will like each other. Interactants strive to maintain an appearance of similarity and cover up any disagreements between themselves because the more similarity, the greater the assumed chance for developing a relationship. Ritualized forms of small talk are used in initial conversational interactions with acquaintances and strangers alike, in situations where self-disclosure is not desirable, and with individuals with perceived attitude differences.

Attraction to others is enhanced and relationships develop more easily when others are perceived to be similar to oneself, and one acts to support that perception by maintaining consistent beliefs about others (Eisenberg, 1984).

Beinstein (1975) reached conclusions that show how people in a community have conversational goals similar to those of dyadic partners. She studied

how ritualized small talk functions as a metacommunication used to maintain stability and cohesion in a community, and sought elements that differentiated communities where public conversation was used from those where it was not used. She found that communicators control disagreement and prevent conflict by performing the conversational ritual of small talk. "They can satisfy needs for human contact with little effort or chance of self-disclosure" (p.148). Collecting reports from 127 beauticians, barbers, and pharmacists about their conversations, she found that there was more cohesion in communities where there was a great deal of small talk versus those where there was not much.

The organization has much in common with a community, but organizational structure is an added dimension which may alter the effects of small talk. In his study on the upward flow of communication in the organization, Glauser (1984) concluded that if subordinates trust supervisors, they will send up more information, and that supervisors can encourage trust by being receptive even to irrelevant information. Trust in one's supervisors is strongly related to frequency and accuracy of upward communication. Many of the messages sent by subordinates when they perceive that their supervisor has time for them, may be irrelevant and not very useful, but "such exchanges, though not helpful to managerial decision-making, have positive effects on employee morale and satisfaction with supervision" (Glauser, 1984, p. 621).

While many questions related to the role of small talk in the workplace emerge from the above research, this study seeks to explore a few of the more basic ones.

1. What are employee's feelings about small talk in general?

2. Is there a correlation between small talk with one's boss and trust in him or her?
3. Does small talk in the organization correlate with openness?
4. What topics do people cover during small talk with boss and coworkers?

Method

A pilot study was conducted with 40 university students who were also working at jobs at least 20 hours a week. The original research question for this study was whether subjects found small talk to be an unpleasant but useful tool in the workplace. Included were statements about silence and nonverbal communication in an attempt to explore Beinstein's conclusion that small talk has a metacommunicative role in binding communities, and assuming that an organization is a type of community.

The questionnaire for the present study focused on questions relating only to small talk and to interpersonal relationships at the workplace. It was designed for employees, seeking their opinions in three areas: small talk and small talk users, the amount of small talk use at their workplace with boss and coworkers, and their opinions about small talk with their boss. A definition was coined to serve as a guide to respondents. "Small talk is superficial talk about matters of little concern" made it clear that small talk could go beyond cliche, and still include a variety of topics.

Questionnaires were handed out by a contact person in each of several corporations or businesses to coworkers. Fifty-one usable questionnaires were collected from respondents at three corporations, an Eastern state university, and at two small businesses. Employees were white collar and

clerical, and lower in their corporate hierarchies. Respondents were asked to refer to the above mentioned definition for small talk as they reacted to a list of statements about small talk. They were asked to use a 5-point Likert scale to rate their reactions to 48 statements about small talk. Following the list were two free-form questions asking what topics they covered in small talk with their boss and coworkers.

Some statements about trust were included to explore any possible correlation between frequency of small talk and trust in one's boss. Moutoux & Porte reported that small talk increased productivity by improving workers' attitudes, and Glauser said that the employees who trust supervisors will communicate upwards more information and that supervisors can encourage trust by being receptive even to irrelevant information. Trust in one's supervisor has been strongly related to frequency and accuracy of upward communication.

The second part of the questionnaire was designed to explore the use of small talk in the workplace, with statements about trust in one's boss, and about attitudes toward small talk with boss and coworkers.

Statistical procedures applied to the data were reliability, frequencies, and correlation. The correlation assumed that the Likert scale intervals were consistent through the questionnaire.

Results

Three statements which seemed to be ambiguously worded or too tangential to the present study were discarded. Overall reliability for for the questionnaire was Alpha .73. For the sake of analysis, the questions

were grouped into two scales: opinions about small talk and small talk users, and small talk in the workplace. Alpha for the opinions scale was .73, and Alpha for the workplace scale was .81.

Respondents generally disagreed with the negative statements about small talk, and overall did not manifest negative opinions about small talk and small talk users. Tables 1 and 2 show by percentage how subjects responded on a 5-point Likert scale to statements about small talk. The lowest means were for negative statements about small talk users, especially, "People who use small talk are stupid" (1.67), and "I don't respect people who use small talk" (1.82). Similarly, 72.5 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, "Small talk is useful" and 88.3 percent agreed with "Small talk enables you to talk to people you otherwise wouldn't talk to." More than half agreed that they trust people they talk to more than those they don't talk to, and 60.8 percent agreed that without small talk they couldn't get to know people.

Respondents seemed to enjoy small talk with coworkers more than with their boss. Forty-eight percent responded "often" or "always" to the statement, "I enjoy small talk with my coworkers," whereas only 15.7 percent responded that way to "I enjoy small talk with my boss."

There was a slightly better than average feeling for the job (3.86) and the boss (3.88).

Tables 3, 4 and 5 show statistically significant correlations among statements about small talk at the workplace. Disagreements with negative statements about small talk generally had high negative correlations with small talk use (see Table 3). Among general statements about small talk,

"I would rather engage in small talk than disclose information about myself" correlates positively with "Small talk enables you to talk to people you otherwise wouldn't talk to" (.33, $p < .01$). Results with the highest confidence level were correlations between "Small talk is stupid" and "I engage in small talk every day" (-.47, $p < .001$).

Correlations among statements about opinions about small talk and smal talk with coworkers show a high confidence interval for "Small talk is stupid" and "I engage in small talk with coworkers (-.52, $p < .001$), "I initiate small talk with coworkers (-.45, $p < .001$), and "Coworkers initiate small talk with me (-.35, $p < .001$).

Table 4 shows correlations among variables about small talk with boss and trust in boss. "When my boss small talks with me, I think he's friendly" correlates .50, $p < .001$ with "I initiate small talk with my boss" .26, $p < .05$ with "My boss initiates small talk with me," .63, $p < .001$ with "I enjoy small talk with my boss" and .52, $p < .001$ with "I feel safe with my boss." There was no direct correlation between the statements "I engage in small talk with my boss" and "I trust my boss."

Correlations between opinions about small talk, and small talk use with boss revealed some negative opinions about small talk with boss. "Small talk is a waste of time" and "My boss initiates small talk with me" correlate positively (.29, $p < .05$). Also, "Small talk is annoying" correlates positively with "I engage in small talk with my boss" (.34, $p < .01$) and "My boss initiates small talk with me" (.32, $p < .05$).

The data did not support the prediction that frequency of small talk with boss would highly correlate with trust in boss. Also the perception

of an open atmosphere did not correlate with amount of small talk use in the workplace.

In Table 6 are two rank order lists of reported topics of small talk engaged in with boss and with coworkers. Respondents listed at least two items each as topics covered in small talk with boss and with coworkers, so the total number of topics in each column is greater than the number of respondents. The topics have been grouped into categories of related items.

Subject matter discussed most among coworkers was "Family and relationships" with 23 respondents reporting topics in this category. Ranking second among employees was "Work, coworkers, boss" (17), and "The arts and current events" (16) which ranked third. Only eight respondents listed "Weather" as a topic for small talk with coworkers.

However, "Weather" was the topic of small talk listed most as subject matter covered with the boss during small talk, with 16 listing it. Two categories ranked second: "Family and people in our lives (12) and "Work, career, business, my plans" (12). Similarly, two categories shared the third place rank: "Arts and current events" (11) and "Personal life, travel, vacation, hobbies" (11).

One difference that appeared among topics of small talk with the boss was that five respondents reported talking about the boss's family and personal relationships. This is consistent with the responses in Table 2 where 82.3 percent answered Never, Not Much to the statement, "I wish my boss knew more about my personal life."

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Sports was listed more on the Boss's side (6) than on Coworkers' side (2). Other items listed were fairly equal, except that with Coworkers, four employees listed "everything," whereas with boss, three employees listed "Nothing" as topics covered during small talk.

Discussion

Respondents did not have negative opinions about small talk and small talk users. Also, they agreed that small talk is useful and that one of its uses is in enabling them to get to know people. On the other hand, respondents did not wish that their boss knew more about their personal lives, and seemed to prefer small talk with coworkers more than with their boss.

Moreover, this study indicates that employees have a negative opinion about some aspects of small talk with their boss. The component of small talk that employees do appear to appreciate is their ability to initiate small talk with their boss.

As the theoretical research indicates, people strive to maintain a stable, predictable, controllable environment. Employees seem to prefer controlling their relationship with their boss by maintaining its nonpersonal nature in such ways as selection of nonpersonal topics during small talk rather than discussing their personal lives as they do with coworkers. More research needs to be done on how small talk assists in maintaining stability in relationships at the workplace, and why employees seem to have a negative view of small talk with their boss.

Furthermore, Moutoux and Porte interviewed supervisors who reported that when they engage in small talk with their employees, employee attitude was improved. However, the results of the present study, in which employees have been surveyed, show that employees have some negative opinions about small talk with their boss. More work needs to be done in this area to determine in which instances small talk with boss may be perceived as inappropriate by employees.

Table 1

Responses to statements about small talk, by percentages, means and standard deviations.

	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5	Mean	Standard Deviation
Small talk is stupid	13.7	54.9	21.6	9.8	0	2.28	.827
S.t. is a waste of time	9.8	52.9	27.5	9.8	0	2.37	.799
I'd rather say nothing than engage in s.t.	15.7	52.9	21.6	7.8	2.0	2.28	.895
I enjoy s.t.	0	11.8	51.0	37.3	0	3.26	.659
I resent s.t.	18.0	48.0	30.0	4.0	0	2.20	.782
If I have nothing to say, I say nothing	7.8	33.3	23.5	29.4	5.9	2.92	1.093
S.t. is useful	0	13.7	13.7	64.7	7.8	3.67	.816
S.t. is annoying	7.8	54.9	27.5	9.8	0	2.39	.777
To use s.t. is dishonest	31.4	54.9	9.8	3.9	0	2.14	.939
S.t. enables you to talk to people you otherwise wouldn't talk to.	0	2.0	9.8	66.7	21.6	4.08	.627
People who don't use s.t. are unfriendly	21.6	60.8	15.7	2.0	0	1.98	.678
People who use s.t. are stupid	37.3	56.9	5.9	0	0	1.69	.583
People who use s.t. are boring	19.6	60.8	19.6	0	0	2.0	.632
People who use s.t. are superficial	19.6	58.8	21.6	0	0	2.02	.648
People who use s.t. are unimaginative	28.0	58.0	14.0	0	0	1.86	.639
I don't respect people who use s.t.	25.5	66.7	7.8	0	0	1.82	.555
I trust people I talk to more than those I don't talk to	2.0	19.6	21.6	47.1	9.8	3.43	.985

	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5	Mean	Standard Deviation
There is a lot of s.t. where I work	0	7.8	27.5	56.9	7.8	3.65	.744
When people I work with don't s.t., I'm not sure how they feel about me	4.0	48.0	24.0	24.0	0	2.68	.891
There's an open atmosphere where I work	3.9	17.6	23.5	47.1	7.8	3.37	.999
When my boss small talks with me I think he's friendly	0	3.9	35.3	56.9	3.9	3.61	.635
Without small talk, I couldn't get to know people	7.8	13.7	17.6	58.8	2.0	3.33	1.013

Table 2

Responses to statements about small talk in the workplace, by percentages

	Never 1	Not Much 2	Sometimes 3	Often 4	Always 5	Mean	Standard Deviation
I feel safe with my boss	0	8.2	34.7	42.9	14.3	3.63	.834
If I have a problem with a task, I feel comfortable telling my boss	2.0	5.9	31.4	51.0	9.8	3.61	.827
I engage in s.t. every day	0	13.7	31.4	35.3	19.6	3.61	.961
I engage in s.t. with coworkers	0	7.8	39.2	35.3	17.6	3.63	.871
I initiate s.t. with coworkers	5.9	7.8	51.0	27.5	7.8	3.24	.929
My coworkers initiate s.t. with me	0	7.8	49.0	35.3	7.8	3.43	.755
I want to help my boss	0	5.9	19.6	52.9	21.6	3.90	.806
I engage in s.t. with my boss	4.0	18.0	56.0	18.0	4.0	3.0	.833
My boss initiates s.t. with me	6.0	18.0	44.0	24.0	8.0	3.1	.995
I initiate s.t, with boss	5.9	37.3	45.1	9.8	2.0	2.65	.820
I confide in my boss	19.6	29.4	41.2	7.8	2.0	2.43	.964
I wish my boss knew more about my personal life	43.1	39.2	15.7	2.0	0	1.77	.790
I feel secure about my job	2.0	5.9	15.7	52.9	23.5	3.90	.900
I'd rather use s.t. than disclose information about myself	3.9	23.5	47.1	21.6	3.9	2.98	.883
I enjoy s.t. with coworkers	0	2.0	50.0	36.0	12.0	3.58	.731
I enjoy s.t. with my boss	5.9	19.6	58.8	11.8	3.9	2.88	.840
I like my job	0	2.0	19.6	68.6	9.8	3.86	.601
I like my boss	0	7.8	19.6	49.0	23.5	3.88	.864

	Never 1	Not Much 2	Sometimes 3	Often 4	Always 5	Mean	Standard Deviation
I trust my boss	3.9	9.8	15.7	51.0	19.6	3.73	1.021
I like my coworkers	0	0	8.0	70.0	22.0	4.14	.535
My boss likes me	0	2.0	22.0	66.0	10.0	3.84	.618
My coworkers like me	0	0	19.6	74.5	5.9	3.86	.491

Table 3

Correlations among variables about opinions about small talk and small talk use at work place

Variable	S.t. is stupid	S.t. is waste of time	I enjoy s.t.	I resent s.t.	If nothing to say	S.t. is useful	S.t. is annoying	S.t. is manipulative	S.t. enables	Don't respect	Lot of s.t. at work	When co's don't s.t., not sure
I feel safe w/boss				.25*								
If prob. w/task, I tell boss						-.29*						
I s.t. every day	-.47***	-.27*	-.24*	-.27*	-.30*			-.30*	.28*	-.39**		
I s.t. w/co's	-.52***	-.34**		-.28*				-.30*		-.39**	.29*	
I initiate s.t. w/coworkers	-.45***		-.25*		-.30*		-.32*	-.30*		-.34**		
Coworkers initiate s.t. w/me	-.35***			-.30*							.28*	
I want to help boss						-.29*			-.26*			-.31*
I s.t. w/boss							.34**					
Boss initiates s.t.	.28*	.29*					.32*					
I'd rather s.t. than disclose								.25*	.33**			
I enjoy s.t. w/co's	-.31*	-.28*		-.41**	-.29*	.24*	-.27*					
I like boss												
I initiate s.t. w/boss											-.27*	

N=51 *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 4

Correlations among variables about small talk with boss and trust in boss

Variable	When boss s.t. he's friendly	I s.t. w/boss	Boss initiates s.t.	I initiate s.t.	I confide in boss	I wish boss knew more	I feel secure about my job	I'd rather s.t. than disclose	I enjoy s.t. w/ boss	I like my job	I like my boss
W/out s.t. I couldn't know people		.32*	.32*			.28*		.30*			-.27*
I feel safe w/boss	.52***	.27*		.36**		.26*		.24*	.46***	.32*	.38*
I tell boss about probs w/tasks	.39**				.39*		.43*		.42*	.41*	.66***
I s.t. every day						.27*			.42*		
I want to help boss	.28*								.31*		
I s.t. w/boss	.44**										
Boss initiates s.t.	.26*	.83***									
I initiate s.t.	.50***	.55***	.36**						.66***	.31*	
I confide in boss	.45**	.48***	.27*			.27*			.56***		.37*
I enjoy s.t. w/coworkers						.35**				.33*	-.24*
I feel secure	.25*	.28*	.38*							.49***	.37*
I'd rather s.t.											-.37**
I enjoy s.t w/boss	.63***	.59***	.51***							.24*	.45***
I like job	.22*								.25*		.40**
I like boss	.43**							.37**	.24*	.39*	
I trust boss	.26*				.49***	.27*	.25*	.41.**	.43**	.30**	.64***
Boss likes me		.57***	.56***		.46***		.30*		.31*		.48***

N=51 *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 5

Correlations among variables about small talk with coworkers

Variable	I engage in s.t. every day	I engage in s.t. w/co-workers	I initiate s.t. w/ coworkers	Coworkers initiate s.t. w/me	I enjoy s.t. w/ coworkers	I'd rather s.t. than disclose info.
Without s.t. I couldn't get to know people	.24*	.32*	.28*	.36**	.27*	.30*
I'd rather s.t. than disclose info about myself.				.25*		
I engage in s.t. every day		.83***	.69***	.65***	.53***	
I engage in s.t. w/coworkers			.78***	.83***	.62***	
I initiate s.t. w/coworkers				.80***	.54***	
I like my job					.32*	

N=51 *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 6

Rank order of topics covered during small talk

With coworkers		With boss	
	Frequency		Frequency
1. Family and relationships	23	1. Weather	16
2. Work, coworkers, boss	17	2. Work, career, business, my plans	12
3. The arts & current events	16	Family, people in our lives	12
4. Personal life, travel, vacation, hobbies, school	14	3. The arts and current events	11
5. Restaurants, food	9	Personal life, travel, vacation, hobbies	11
6. Weather	8	4. Sports	6
7. Jokes, incidents	7	5. Restaurants, food	5
8. Errands, clothes, shopping	6	His/her family, personal life, boyfriend	5
9. Feelings, health, religion	4	Feelings, health, religion, past experiences	5
10. Everything	4	6. Jokes, incidents	4
11. Sports	2	7. money, cars, real estate	3
12. Investments, real estate	2	Nothing	3
13. Pets	2	8. Pets	2
		Our city	2
		9. sales	1

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